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The Jew in Situ: Variations of Zionism in Early Twentieth Century America

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“There is no bridge between Washington and Pinsk.” So lectured Chaim Weizmann, president of the Zionist Organization, to the delegates at the annual American Zionist convention in Cleveland in June 1921. Weizmann was presenting a stark choice to American Jews who wished to support Zionism. On the one side stood the core principles of Zionism as they were first pronounced in Europe, in “Pinsk”—Jews everywhere wallow in exile, and Zionism is the only viable answer. On the other side was, in Weizmann’s schema, an Americanized and therefore deracinated Zionism, that of “Washington,” which viewed America as home and construed Zionism as a philanthropic mission to aid Jews suffering elsewhere. Even at this early stage in Zionist history, the prospects for building a Jewish state in Palestine were inextricably linked to the construction of Jewish identity in America and closely associated with questions of Jewish authenticity.

In making his distinction between an authentic Jewish nationalism with roots in Europe and a deracinated Jewishness situated in America, Weizmann formulated a dichotomy that would come to characterize the way scholars have interpreted Zionism’s or Israel’s impact on American Jews for decades. In this essay, I question the historicity of this dichotomy. Both kinds of Zionism—the Zionism of “Pinsk” and “Washington”—had their intellectual purveyors among Zionist leaders in early twentieth-century America. One kind was endorsed by a cohort of prestigious figures, first among them Louis Brandeis. The other kind found exponents among an array of more obscure writers and thinkers, and I analyze three of the most important and, to my mind, largely neglected. Neither version of Zionism was more germane to early twentieth-century America than the other, and both were shaped by historical forces at play in America at the time. Such an examination will question the presumption of an exclusive authenticity as it applies to American Zionism and American Jewish identity and will reveal how both versions reflected attempts to square a commitment to Jewishness with prevailing American intellectual currents and concerns.
THE AMERICANIZATION PARADIGM

Taking for granted the exceptionalism of the American Jewish experience, historians have claimed that in order for American Jews of all backgrounds to embrace the Zionist cause, Zionism had to shed its European characteristics. In its European form, Zionism conceived of all Jewish life outside of Palestine as *golus* (exile). Antisemitism, European Zionists contended, would always afflict Jews across the diaspora until the majority of them moved to Palestine and founded a state of their own. This axiom made sense to European Zionists, who had experienced firsthand the frustrations of emancipation or the depredations of antisemitism. Finding in America economic opportunities, political liberties, and a benign social order that Europe apparently lacked, America’s Jews could never adopt the notion, so the argument has gone, that America constituted exile, as did Europe. Zionism in America therefore had to be adapted to America’s unique conditions.

The leaders of American Zionism, scholars have repeatedly pointed out, departed from their European colleagues by seeking to demonstrate how Zionism reinforced rather than undermined the place of Jews in American life. They maintained that the Zionist project of rescuing diaspora Jewry from the clutches of exile did not apply to America’s Jews. Zionism for American Jews instead came to represent another philanthropic venture whereby American Jews collected large funds to save Jews who lived elsewhere. In asserting that America, and not Palestine, was their home, American Zionists constructed a Zionism that perfectly cohered with good Americanism. The extent to which immigrant Jews began to adopt this version of Zionism suggests the extent to which they had become “American” as well.  

Scholars found confirmation of this view in the biography of perhaps the foremost leader of American Zionism in the early twentieth century, Louis Brandeis. Brandeis, an attorney with extensive experience in progressive causes who in 1916 became the first Jew to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, applied his American progressivist commitments to the philosophy of Zionism he propounded while operating as nominal or de facto leader of the movement from 1914 to 1921. Brandeis devoted most of his public utterances and writings about Zionism during these years to the task of reconciling Zionism and Americanism, the goal of which was to establish that people could support one without compromising on the other. Brandeis’s embrace of Zionism and his argument that Zionism in America meant saving the Jews of Europe, some have argued, demonstrated to the masses of immigrant Jewry that one could...
indeed be a good Zionist and a good American, thus leading to the populariza-
tion of Zionism in the United States during the war.

How could one back an enterprise that demanded loyalty to a foreign
political cause without at the same time jeopardizing one’s allegiance to Amer-
ica? Brandeis’s answer to this question was twofold: (1) American accultura-
tion did not require a complete rejection of old world commitments, and (2)
American and Jewish values intersected so seamlessly that supporting the latter
via Zionism in fact reinforced rather than tainted the former. Brandeis rejected
the melting pot theory of American identity, which demanded that America’s
many immigrant groups shed their old world attachments and ethnic markers
to produce a new, homogeneous American nation. Instead, Brandeis endorsed
“cultural pluralism,” or the premise shared by an influential cohort of Ameri-
can intellectuals, Jewish and non-Jewish, that America was and would con-
tinue to be a nation composed of many ethnic groups, or as Brandeis called
them “nationalities,” all united in their loyalty both to their own cultures and
to fundamental American principles. Each ethnic group had its special con-
tribution to make to American civilization, and therefore each should work to
preserve its heritage. At the same time that immigrant groups shared their gifts
with a broader American society, they would adopt core American principles
and become part of a greater American whole, loyally devoted to America as
well as to their old homes.

For Brandeis, no ethnic group was more capable than America’s Jews
of realizing the cultural pluralist vision, so thoroughly did Brandeis believe
that Jewish and American principles coincided. “Jews,” he declared, “were by
reason of their traditions and their characters peculiarly fitted for the attain-
ment of American ideals.” Brandeis maintained that Jews inherited from the
Bible a devotion to democracy, social justice, and truth and had nurtured these
values over the course of their long exile. America therefore offered an invit-
ing, almost natural environment for Jewish achievement, as Brandeis argued
in one key essay in 1915. “The ability of the Russian Jew to adjust himself to
America’s essentially democratic conditions . . . lies mainly in the fact that the
twentieth century ideals of America have been the ideals of the Jew for more
than twenty centuries.”

Brandeis maintained that those Jewish ideals, and in turn the project of
American-Jewish synthesis, could be actualized best by a strong commitment
to Zionism. According to Brandeis, the furtherance of the Jews’ biblical-cum-
American values in Palestine—which Brandeis considered to be the overarch-
ing purpose of Zionism—would strengthen the innate Jewish attachment to
democracy, social justice, and the like within America itself. Brandeis expected Zionism to implement in Palestine such quintessential American concepts as the “brotherhood of man,” “social justice,” and “effective democracy,” which were all forged in the crucible of Jewish history and enshrined in Jewish law. For this reason he frequently referred to the first Zionist settlers of Palestine as “Jewish Pilgrim Fathers” or “Palestinian Pilgrim Fathers.” Famously emphasizing the intersection of Zionism and Americanism at an address at a regional assembly of Reform rabbis in 1915, Brandeis averred that “Loyalty to America demands rather that each American Jew become a Zionist. For only through the ennobling effect of its striving can we develop the best that is in us and give to this country the full benefit of our great inheritance.” Zionism, in other words, brings to the fore pristine Jewish values that are quintessentially American. In supporting the Zionist program, Jews will share those values with the greater American society as well as actualize them in Palestine, thus fulfilling the mechanics of cultural pluralism. In turn, Jews will become better Americans themselves.

The essential point here is that Brandeis believed that Jews were not just perfectly at home in America but that America facilitated the expression of core Jewish values in a way that no other country could. America was the natural domicile of modern Jewry, and Palestine would be its laboratory, a home for East European Jews built in the American image. Exile, or golus, America was not. Brandeis’s Americanism-Zionism synthesis captured the thinking of a number of other leading Zionist figures of the period, such as Julian Mack, Stephen Wise, and Felix Frankfurter, all of whom revered Brandeis and considered him the unrivaled leader of the movement. It would be a mistake to conclude, however, that Brandeis’s philosophy ruled the day or that its alternatives, while deviating from Brandeis’s version of good Americanism, were not themselves a fusion of American and Jewish concepts or influenced by American intellectual and social currents.

THE TRUE JEW

Between November 1924 and February 1925 New Palestine, the Zionist Organization of America’s (ZOA) English-language weekly, ran a symposium on the question of what the role of religion in the future Jewish Palestine should be. Leaders from across the political and religious spectrum of American Jewish life weighed in on the topic. Regardless of their answer, the majority
agreed that an authentic Jewishness that had been stifled by centuries of exile could reemerge only in Palestine. Arguing that Americans should refrain from making demands on how Palestine’s Jews organized public life, Maurice Samuel insisted that “Palestine is going to produce, or reproduce, the true type of Jew, which we in the Diaspora have forgotten. . . . We are not fit to pass on the question. Let Palestine work itself out.” Another symposium participant, Abe Fromenson, disagreed with Samuel. Fromenson countered that the observance of Jewish law must be a nonnegotiable component of Palestinian public life, averring that “In Eretz Yisroel we hope to achieve our aspirations for a complete Jewish life in a completely Jewish environment, with a physical and psychological background of Jewish history.”

Yet despite their differences, Samuel and Fromenson agreed that only Palestine could allow for the emergence of an authentic or “complete” Judaism, however defined. This is not to say that Samuel and Fromenson called on all Jews to leave America for Palestine. They and others articulated an alternative American Zionism, one more ambivalent about Jewish life in the United States yet just as germane to interwar America as Brandeis’s. This section explores the conceptual worlds of Maurice Samuel and two of his colleagues, Samuel Melamed and Ludwig Lewisohn. All journalists and men of influence in Jewish letters (if not wider American letters in the case of Lewisohn), they adhered to the view that Jewish life in America was somehow under assault, flawed, and incomplete and could survive only through the emergence of a superior Jewishness in Palestine.

Maurice Samuel’s Zionism was rooted in assumptions about America, diaspora, and nationalism that differed substantially from Brandeis. Abandoning any sort of Jewish practice for socialism while attending university in England, Samuel embraced Zionism as a young man and worked for the ZOA after World War I as a propagandist and administrator. A prolific author, he achieved notoriety for his third book, You Gentiles, published in 1924. You Gentiles ruminated on the differences between Jews and non-Jews, rejecting in the process the central premises of Brandeis’s philosophy. In that book, Samuel described “Gentile” and “Jewish” types, arguing that the two were immutable and irreconcilable. There would always be frictions between them, Samuel claimed. Jewish assimilation of any kind was impossible and, moreover, was a cause of rather than a solution to pervasive intergroup frictions.

Doubting the possibility of the harmonious exchange of different groups’ gifts or the benefits of any sort of synthesis of American and Jewish values,
Samuel instead limned a portrait of persistent tension punctuated only by moments of fleeting quiet. “With the best will on both sides, successful adaptation to each other will always be insecure and transient,” he wrote. “We shall delude ourselves . . . with the belief that we have bridged the gulf.”

Samuel therefore rejected the notion that America’s Jews must accommodate themselves to American life and culture. “These are two ways of life, each utterly alien to the other,” wrote Samuel. “Each has its place in the world—but they cannot flourish in the same soil.”

Considering America to be foreign soil, it is not surprising that Samuel lauded with frequency Jewish life in Palestine while construing life in America as a cheap replacement, forever incomplete. Zionism, Samuel wrote in another article that appeared in New Palestine in 1923, “is about transplanting into our lives, as far as possible, those vital forces which we would inherit naturally if we lived in the Jewish homeland.” In this Samuel revealed his romantic-nationalist interpretation of Zionism, an outlook that assumed an organic connection between nations and the territories that birthed them. No matter how committed to Zionism, there must always remain, in Samuel’s view, something “artificial” about American Jewish life, divorced as it is from Palestine, the putative birth land of the Jewish people, and submerged as it is in a “Gentile” environment anathema to the “Jewish” essence. Whereas a foreign land such as America militated against the full expression of the Jewish spirit, Palestine, the Jews’ natural domicile, naturally generated it, a point that Samuel elaborated upon in I, the Jew, a book published in 1927 that received more positive acclaim.

In I, the Jew Samuel reiterated the idea that Jewish life could be complete only in Palestine. According to Samuel, the topography of Palestine produced essential Jewish tendencies, such as the Jews’ paradoxical proclivity for abstractions and an attention to material concerns, that endured for thousands of years. Traveling across the Jezreel Valley in Palestine, for example, Samuel exclaimed, “The same concentration of infinity in the image of daily life occurs again in the Valley of Yizreel [sic]. All life’s problems are reproduced here . . . but the answer that will be given will be as remote from the spirit of the western world as the answers given more than twenty years ago.”

Insisting that Zionism must transcend the mere need to find a refuge for persecuted Jews, that Zionism was about Jewish spiritual well-being rooted in the land as much as the Jews’ physical security, he wrote that “if there is any meaning at all in an hereditary culture, in the forces which move among us to make us something more than the brute, then we can base our claim on something
greater than the need of the individual—the need of a spirit which cannot live itself out except in the place of its birth.”

Perhaps no better example of an American Zionist intellectual who expressed grave doubts about the possibilities of acculturation in America and stressed the imperatives of reviving Jewishness in Palestine is offered by Samuel M. Melamed. Born in Russian Lithuania, Melamed came to America in 1914 and served as writer or editor under several major Yiddish and English newspapers. By the 1920s he was a regular contributor to *New Palestine*, and by 1927 he was running his own journal of Jewish opinion, *Reflex*. Infamous among other American Jews for his underhanded journalistic practices and his libelous editorial polemics, Melamed emerged as the gadfly of American Jewish letters in the interwar years, consistently denouncing American Judaism as overly materialistic, culturally vapid, and altogether irredeemable. In one article he wrote for *New Palestine* in December 1923, for example, he proclaimed that life in America and the rest of the diaspora corrupted the Jewish personality to such an extent that American Jews had devolved into “mental cripples.” They had become souls “clothed in garments foreign to it,” concealing indefinitely the soul’s true nature. “The Jew in countries of the diaspora is not a pure Jew, that is to say, he is not typically Jewish as the Germans are typically German . . . but is partly the Jew and partly the product of his environment, his education,” Melamed pontificated. Only in Palestine, he claimed, would a “real Jew” emerge: “A normal and well-balanced life will produce a normal and well-balanced Jew. This normal and well-balanced Jew will be the typical Jew and the real representative of the Jewish ‘species’.”

In this Melamed advanced a thesis similar to Samuel’s that he would repeat throughout the interwar period: the emergence of a robust, authentic, and complete Jewish culture was impossible outside of a Jewish Palestine. The creation of a complete Jewish culture was linked to Melamed’s trenchant denunciation of all forms of Jewish religion, which he viewed as an illegitimate by-product of the diasporic condition. Because Jews lived among other peoples and were constantly under threat, Melamed argued, Jewish religion and law had become calcified, leading to centuries of “frozen culture” that had produced nothing worthwhile since Maimonides’s *Guide to the Perplexed* and had failed to stem the tides of Jewish dissolution to boot.

In Melamed’s imagined Palestine, Jewish law would be adjudicated by secular courts, Jewish religious praxis would evolve organically, rabbis would become unnecessary, and an authentic Jewish “civilization” would emerge unimpeded by a repressive system of religious observance. “All the ‘fences’
established around the Jewish fundamental laws will be done away with, because these ‘fences’ . . . have been established for the purpose of preserving the Jewish religion. . . . In Palestine there will be no need” for them, Melamed concluded. Though he focused more on critiquing Jewish religion than did Samuel, the same assumptions about diaspora and homeland that drove Samuel’s thinking undergirded Melamed’s.

Ludwig Lewisohn’s critique of assimilation in the 1920s resembled Samuel’s and Melamed’s in key ways. Even before Lewisohn declared himself a Zionist, the then arts editor of The Nation had published in 1922 a memoir, Up Stream, in which he despaired of the possibilities of cultural pluralism in America. In Up Stream Lewisohn detailed his difficulties securing a teaching position in a university upon graduating from Columbia with a PhD in English language and literature. He identified the ingrained anti-Jewish animosity that worked to limit his employment opportunities in the academy, notwithstanding the fact that he was a converted Christian and, by his own account, thoroughly assimilated.

Lewisohn attributed his personal travails to a larger postwar American reaction against all those deemed outside of the Anglo-Saxon mainstream, a trend that he felt had become more severe by the time of his publishing of his first open statement of support for Zionism, the travelogue Israel, in 1925. In Israel, Lewisohn countered nativist demands for “one hundred percent” loyalty, assimilation, or intermarriage, arguing that “Aryans” and “Jews” constitute diametrically opposed types. Any kind of accommodation between them, Lewisohn felt, was futile, for Jews in America who sought to acculturate would always face the antagonism of non-Jews who perceived them as different, and Jews, conversely, would always feel the buried yet continuously throbbing impulse that they in fact were.

Lewisohn dramatized the impossibilities of assimilation and the importance of staying true to one’s self in his most celebrated piece of writing from the 1920s, the novel The Island Within, published in 1928. The protagonist, a son of German Jewish parents who seeks to escape his Jewishness through professional success and intermarriage, ultimately discovers that there is no outrunning his background and that he must return to his people. The protagonist’s father offered this comment about the impossibilities of rapprochement between Jew and non-Jew upon learning of his son’s marriage to a non-Jewish woman, the daughter of a Protestant minister, words that would prove prescient when his son’s marriage ends in divorce. These words articulate the thrust of the novel:
Dey hate us. Dey all hate us... It voild be all right if dey vere bet people. But some det hate us most are fine ent honest people in every odder yav. Ent it would be all right if ve vere bet people ent deserved to be hated. But ve are a good people, honest ent hart- working ent kin tent charitable ent en educated people... Ent dey hate us... [E]very Goy in der vorlrd hes a little bit of det hate in him. He cen't help it... But det little bit of hate between men ent vife—Vell, I said too much already.

In *Israel* and *The Island Within*, Lewisohn offered two solutions to the plight of the Jew living in the West and chafing against the twin expectations to assimilate but to remain apart, excluded, and despised. As the title suggests, *Israel* would seem to argue that only in Palestine can Jews free themselves from the burdens of exile. Explaining the decision of a group of young women to work as pioneers in a colony in Palestine, Lewisohn wrote in *Israel* that they had not fled pogroms or other physical violence but instead had sought to transcend the kinds of pressure with which any American Jew was forced to contend: “They have escaped the false position, the moral discomfort, the thousand restraints and inhibitions and subtle injustices of their old lives. Here they stand upon their own earth; they are among their own folk. Life takes on a new freedom and naturalness, a new spontaneity.”

Yet, Lewisohn differed from Samuel and Melamed in the extent to which he acknowledged that Jews could reconstruct an authentic Jewishness outside of Palestine. “Every Jew can find himself. I have done so. Not everyone need go upon so long a pilgrimage,” Lewisohn wrote in *Israel*. Lewisohn believed that the Jews of the diaspora could actively choose to spurn assimilation, to proudly embrace their Jewishness, to create a thick Jewish culture and social life devoid of the impulse to conform to non-Jewish mores and pressures. In so doing, they would be counteracting the forces of reactionary and belligerent nationalism that demanded the dilution of all minority groups in the name of Anglo conformity. Lewisohn believed that such chauvinism, the opposite of a distinctly Jewish “spiritual nationalism,” had caused World War I and was polluting the world. Choosing Jewishness, in other words, was Lewisohn’s antidote for postwar reaction.

This Lewisohn’s protagonist in *The Island Within* accomplishes after undergoing great psychological hardship, deciding to divorce his non-Jewish wife, abandon his job at a clinic for work at a Jewish hospital, provide his son with a rigorous Jewish education, and embark on a medical mission to assist the persecuted Jews of Romania but not to move to Palestine. Lewisohn thus
differed from Samuel and Melamed, both of whom did not allow for the possibility of a compelling and fulfilling return to Jewishness outside of Palestine. Yet in his idealization of a Jewish turning inward, in his search for a free and complete kind of Jewishness insulated from any sort of “Americanism,” and in his trenchant critique of assimilation, Lewisohn parted ways with Brandeisian concerns about synthesizing Americanism and Zionism.

Thus, their differences notwithstanding, Samuel, Melamed, and Lewisohn operated with a shared set of assumptions that militated against Brandeis’s views. According to these three, Jews constitute a racial type separate and distinct from other types among whom they live. Any kind of acculturation to American norms is a fool’s errand at best, a perversion of one’s race consciousness at worst. America, no matter how hospitable it may appear in comparison to Europe, exerts the same corrosive effects on Jewish life as does any other diasporic society, and Jews are just as alien to the American environment as they are to that of any in Europe. Finally, and more along the lines of Samuel and Melamed than Lewisohn, the only possibility for discovering and fostering authentic Jewishness could occur in Palestine, the land of the Jews’ birth and the natural climate of the Jewish race as well as a habitat unsullied by the foreign influences and pressures of the diaspora.

MODERNISM AND NATIVISM

Current historiography has drawn a sharp division between the “American” Zionism of Brandies and his circle and the sort of “immigrant” Zionism that stressed the ubiquity of antisemitism, the perils of assimilation, or the notion of America as golus. This schema has been employed to categorize the views of Samuel, Lewisohn, and Melamed as remnants of a European Zionist legacy that percolated in American Zionist circles in the early decades of the twentieth century but eventually lost any allure and disappeared as Jews Americanized. Yet Samuel, Lewisohn, and Melamed had all lived in America for a decade or more by the interwar years. They hailed from German as well as East European backgrounds; they all possessed thorough modern educations, either acquired as students or autodidacts; and they all wielded considerable influence in Zionist affairs and American Jewish letters. Instead of marginalizing their views as “immigrant” or “foreign,” it is worth considering how two competing interwar trends germane to American intellectual life, cultural nationalism and nativism, shaped their thinking.
On the one hand, Zionism in America during the interwar period must be situated within larger developments in American modernism that spurred a reconsideration of notions of race, culture, and nation. Following the war, a number of prominent white and black American writers and artists began to call for an American renaissance that would provoke a break between America, a land of progress and promise, and Europe, the site of reaction and world war. They sought out America’s authentic cultural wellsprings, such as black folk songs, and hoped to undo what they saw as American culture’s thoroughgoing Puritanism, which they deemed a backwards vestige of European culture. These intellectuals placed great value on what they saw as America’s racial or ethnic diversity and transnational makeup, seeing this as a key source of American cultural vitality and the path to re-create what it means to be American. They were therefore fiercely critical both of the nativist demands for cultural assimilation into a homogenous and insipid American type and of the dissemination of lowbrow urban culture marred by materialism.

In their publicist and journalist activities, all three men interacted in one way or another with the circles of non-Jewish intellectuals who embodied this sort of modernist cultural shift in American arts and letters. Lewisohn was an editor at The Nation, one of the premier outlets that advanced the new cultural nationalism and engaged in a thorough criticism of American race relations. Samuel’s two books, You Gentiles and I, the Jew, were published by Harcourt, Brace, and Co., a publishing house renowned for giving voice to American critics, black writers, and translations of European modernist works. And Melamed’s journal Reflex was a patent imitation of American Mercury, H. L. Mencken’s organ of trenchant opinion that advanced the cultural nationalism of the interwar period.

Samuel, Lewisohn, and Melamed, in turn, all employed elements of the interwar modernist critique of American life in their own writings on Zionism and American Jewish life. Samuel’s emphasis on the connection between soil and nation repurposed modernists’ adulation for an American folk culture rooted in the American South or the American frontier. Melamed’s vilification of Jewish religion as a mummified and unproductive form of Jewishness invoked modernist critiques of Puritanism as an impediment to American renaissance, mirroring the language of figures such as Mencken. Lewisohn’s depiction of Zionism as a “spiritual nationalism” echoed modernist opposition to the nativism of the period. In sum, all three exemplified interwar cultural
nationalism in decrying assimilation, advocating for a Jewish cultural revival unmoored from traditional religious practices and beliefs, and seeking to locate an “authentic” source for Jewish life.

Conversely, Samuel, Lewisohn, and Melamed adopted the very nativist categories and modes of logic that cultural nationalists at the time so vehemently opposed. Nativists in the interwar years insisted that Jewishness and Americanness inherently disrupted each other—in other words, that one could not be a Jew and at the same time be “one hundred percent” American. In many of their public writings, American Zionists countered that there was no predominant American type; rather, America was composed of many nationalities, each with its own contributions to American life and culture. However, not unlike contemporary black intellectuals who both polemicized against but could also sometimes adopt the nativism that targeted them, Samuel and Melamed exhibited the inverse of the nativist logic in their argument that one could be a complete Jew only in Palestine—that America, in other words, undermined one’s “one hundred percent” Jewishness.

With his argument that one could return to a form of authentic Jewishness outside of Palestine, Lewisohn remained more committed to the cultural pluralist vision. But even he adopted nativist notions of immutable racial types and nativist criticisms of hybrid identities, arguing as he did that Jews could thrive in America only if they resisted blending with their larger environments and mingling with non-Jews and instead stayed true to some sort of Jewish essence. The fixation of these three thinkers on notions of racial essence and completeness, along with their hostility to cultural exchange and synthesis, bespeaks the subtle ways that American nativism, the scourge of Jews and other minorities in interwar America, influenced their thinking.

CONCLUSION

Samuel, Melamed, and Lewisohn disagreed with Brandeis about not only the imperatives of amalgamating Americanism and Zionism but also what it meant to be an authentic Jew. For Brandeis, it entailed a merger of Jewish and American values, with Zionism as a way for Jews to actualize purely American—and purely Jewish—principles. America therefore offered the penultimate home for Jews. For Samuel, Melamed, and Lewisohn, it meant the expression of an uncorrupted Jewish essence, with Zionism serving as the path to discovering a Jew’s “island within.” This task was made difficult if not impossible in America.
Scholars have tended to reify the differences between Brandeis and Samuel, Melamed, and Lewisohn, seeing the former as an articulation of Americanized Jewishness and deeming the latter as the final gasps of a Pinsk-oriented Zionism in an immigrant Jewish community rapidly acculturating. Yet, both drew from the American cultural universe in which American Jewish intellectuals were situated. Neither could claim a monopoly on “authentic” Jewishness or Americanized nationalism; instead, both sought to integrate prevailing ideas about America, race, culture, and nationalism into their own interpretations of what Zionism signified.

Historians of American Jewry ought to reckon with the fact that some leading intellectuals of American Zionism, all of whom wielded significant cultural influence in American Jewish letters and organizational influence in the ZOA in the 1920s, expressed open doubt about the notion of America as a special home. That this chorus became more intellectually sophisticated and grew louder in the 1920s suggests that American Zionists did not move easily or simply from an “immigrant” to an “American” mentality, much as immigrant Jews at large did not blaze a simple path from foreigners to full-fledged, confident, and secure Americans.

The America that Jews encountered in the early twentieth century was a land of contradictions, not a place of unvarnished freedoms. It no doubt offered its Jewish citizens unprecedented economic opportunities and political liberties and largely shielded them from the violence that had become emblematic of life in imperial Russia and then war-torn Eastern Europe. But this was also a country where Jews faced dire questions about the maintenance of Jewish culture and the durability of Jewish sociological boundaries. It was a place where antisemitism was expressed freely in the popular press, prejudices against Jews ran rampant in universities and professional spaces, and nativism was debated openly in Congress. Jews of all religious and political persuasions had to negotiate this confusing American blend of tolerance and exclusion. Some American Zionists embraced Brandeis’s progressive-inspired optimism, while others resorted to the nativist-inflected pessimism of Samuel, Melamed, and Lewisohn.

NOTES


2. In my view, aspects of this narrative characterize the current scholarship on American Zionism. For a number of prominent examples, see Melvin Urofsky, American Zionism
Only a few scholars have advanced critiques of what one could call the Americanization paradigm. Maier Bryan Fox found significant divergences between Brandeis’s views and that of the “masses” and rejected Shapiro’s argument of wholesale assimilation in the 1920s. Few have taken note of the significance of Fox’s contributions. See Maier Bryan Fox, “American Zionism in the 1920s” (PhD diss., George Washington University, 1979), I–V. Evyatar Freisel questioned Urofsky’s premise that Brandeis was most responsible for the growth of Zionism during World War I, arguing instead that many of the major ideological and organizational underpinnings of the ZOA’s growth were in place years before Brandeis became president of the Provisional Executive Committee of General Zionist Affairs. See Evyatar Freisel, “The Influence of Zionism on the American Jewish Community: An Assessment by Israeli and American Historians,” American Jewish History 2, no. 22 (1985): 132–33, 144. In Zionism and the Roads Not Taken: Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Kohn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), Noam Pianko surmised that American Jewish historians’ emphasis on the non-European character of American Zionism reflected those historians’ wish to portray integration and synthesis as a resounding success. Pianko, in contrast, found in the thought of the three intellectuals he studied profound feelings of “unrootedness” and the ongoing influence of European theories of nationalism. See 22, 122, and especially 129, where he differentiates Mordechai Kaplan’s conception of American Zionism from that of Brandeis.

3. Some, such as Urofsky, lauded Brandeis’s “Americanization” of Zionism, seeing it as one of his signal intellectual achievements and a main reason for the rapid growth of Zionism during the war years. Others, such as Jerold Auerbach, argued that it eviscerated American Zionism of some sort of authentic Jewish content and spurred bickering within different factions of the ZOA through the 1920s. See Urofsky, American Zionism, 126–27; Jerold S. Auerbach, Rabbis and Lawyers: The Journey from Torah to Constitution (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), chap. 6; Jonathan D. Sarna, “The Greatest Jew in the World since Jesus Christ: The Jewish Legacy of Louis D. Brandeis,” American Jewish History 81, no. 3 (Spring–Summer 1994): 354–59; Philippa Strum, Brandeis: Beyond Progressivism (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 107–9. In my view, both Urofsky’s interpretation and Auerbach’s critique reify dichotomies between Americanized and authentic Jewishness/Zionism that the historical actors themselves utilized to tar their opponents. In the process, both miss an opportunity to properly contextualize the various factions in early twentieth-century American Zionism.


6. Ibid., 22, 44, 49.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 28–29.

9. Ibid., 29.

10. Ibid., 27–28, 63.

11. Ibid.

12. See *New Palestine* for the following figures’ views on the question: Emmanuel Neumann (November 14, 1924), Maurice Samuel (November 14, 1924), Simon Bernstein (November 28, 1924), Oscar Leonard (December 5, 1924), M. Pollak (December 12, 1924), A. H. Fromenson (December 19, 1924), Sol Rosenbloom (December 19, 1924), J. Mitchell Rosenberg (December 25, 1924), Morris Lazaron (January 9, 1925), Bernard Drachman (January 27, 1925).


15. Of the three, Lewisohn, a writer for the respected American journal *The Nation*, a professor at a major university, and a well-published author, carried the most prestige. Samuel may have been the most well-traveled ZOA propagandist of the 1920s, addressing thousands of Jews across the country on various topics related to Zionism as well as his books. See, e.g., *New Palestine*, June 26, 1925. Along with publishing frequently in *New Palestine* and running his own journal of opinion, *Reflex*, Melamed played a large role both in Chicago Zionist and national Zionist affairs. See, e.g., “Conference of Chicago Zionists,” *New Palestine*, January 25, 1924).

16. For the opprobrium it provoked among Jewish pundits, see, e.g., Abram Lipsky’s review in *New Palestine*, January 30, 1925; David Phillipson’s review in *American Israelite*, November 13, 1924; and the editorial in *Jewish Exponent*, October 31, 1924). See also Samuel Schulman’s review in *Jewish Exponent*, November 21, 1924. For Samuel’s response to some of his critics, see his article “You Critics of ‘You Gentiles,’” published in *American Israelite*, January 22, 1925, among other venues.


20. Though not without its detractors, *I, the Jew* was received more favorably by critics in Jewish and non-Jewish publications and attracted far less controversy. See, e.g.,
Louis Finkelstein’s review in *New Palestine*, May 20, 1927, which explicitly draws a sharp contrast with *You Gentiles*, as well as the favorable review in the *New York Times*, April 24, 1927.


22. Ibid., 210.

23. For reminiscences that reveal Melamed’s brash approach as well as his lowly reputation, see Meyer Weisgal, *So Far . . .* (New York: Random House, 1971), 70–71, as well as Marie Syrkin’s impression, discussed in Carole Kessner, *Marie Syrkin: Values beyond the Self* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008), 177.


25. S. M. Melamed, “Zionism,” *New Palestine*, November 6, 1925. For other examples, see his articles in *New Palestine* (December 7, 1923; January 29, 1926; June 25, 1926; January 7, 1927) as well as his editorials in his journal of opinion, *Reflex*.


31. Ibid., 280.

32. Ibid., 109, 236, 249–52, 278.

33. For an example of this interpretation as it relates to Samuel and Lewisohn, see Shapiro, *Leadership of the American Zionist Organization*, 228.


36. For some examples, see Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance*, 96–107, 210–11, 319.


